

Nancy Weiss Malkiel

*"Keep the Damned Women Out": The Struggle for Coeducation*

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Numerous undergraduate colleges and universities in the United States, both public and private, chose to integrate male and female students in the nineteenth century. The elite institutions studied by Nancy Weiss Malkiel in *"Keep the Damned Women Out"* resisted this educational trend until after the Second World War, and often changed their policies for the same reason as their Victorian predecessors had, and experienced similar resistance to doing so. In the decades following the Second World War, higher education was "upended and reshaped" (xv) in light of political and social movements that had direct impacts on college-aged Americans. The intersections of civil and women's rights, and an increased willingness to integrate, resulted in the expansion of the entire system of higher education to those who previously had limited opportunities to pursue college or university degrees. "As students worked together for causes larger than their own parochial interests, the barriers dividing men and women became more porous and less consequential" (271), Malkiel writes. Her research in this book supports the idea that sharing educational spaces can propel more positive interactions beyond the classroom.

At more than 600 pages in length, *"Keep the Damned Women Out"* is a behemoth that is not as unruly as one might expect. Malkiel introduces the *dramatis personae* in each institution's story with a surprising amount of background detail, giving the analysis of events a story-telling quality that speeds reading. Two sets of images embedded within Chapters 7 and 15 might seem unnecessary in the age of the Internet; instead the extensive captions enable the reader to remain within the narrative Malkiel is presenting, rather than having to exit it to look up additional information. The book is largely chronological, looking first at each institution's debates over, and subsequent conclusion about, coeducation. Then, just as systematically, Malkiel examines the extent of integration of students on each campus in the classroom and outside of it. Ancillary considerations, like the hiring and retention of women as administrators and the use of quotas in the admissions process, are dealt with in the same amount of minutia as the central narrative. Was it possible to have "sex-blind admissions" (281) procedures? Should institutions increase size of the student body until the number of women equalled that of men or should they admit fewer men to make room for women students? In the longer term, was it possible to assess the effectiveness of coeducation in contrast with other models of university study for women? These are questions that academics will never cease to ask as student demographics continue to diversify in the twenty-first century.

The differing destinies of Radcliffe, Smith, Vassar, and Wellesley that Malkiel examines, and her inclusion of parallel events at Oxford and Cambridge, illustrate the complexity of the overarching debates about women's access to the Ivy League and how this progress was affected by what was done elsewhere. The backstories of the English colleges are not as fully developed as those of the American ones, but their

purpose is to serve as comparisons and, in that respect, their incorporation is beneficial. Also important is the fact that all of the institutions Malkiel studies have what she terms an “outsized influence” (xviii) on society. Their graduates, male and female, are looked to as leaders of their nations who will shape future policy. And, no matter how much historians might like to see larger trends, it is crucial to remember that each institution’s path is unique. Similarly, every advocate or critic of the choices the institutions made around co-education has their own motivations for that stance and their own desired outcomes as well. In the end, the determinations institutions made were what was thought to be best for an institution’s future.

Malkiel gives ample consideration to the need for academic and social facilities for each sex, along with objections from current students and “alumni discontent” (59). Worries about the diversion of resources and competition with other colleges were fundamental in each institution’s decision to become coeducational. The approaches that were attempted or rejected by the administrators are evaluated, including establishing coordinate college relationships and mergers, cross-registration of courses, and the Twelve-College Exchange. One of Malkiel’s most memorable sections is a discussion of efforts to market Vassar to newly admitted male students, because it reminds us that sex discrimination cut both ways. Limiting fields of academic study to include only men kept women out; however fields reserved for women, like nursing, were often exclusionary to male students as well. Furthermore, the “conditioning of men and women about sex roles” (433) affected men and women alike. Though histories tracing the reasons to pursue coeducation typically highlight the experiences of female students, Malkiel endeavours to provide the perspectives of all stakeholders. The depth of resources—ranging from enrolment and testing data to news releases to school songs, plus the author’s own interviews with key players done between 2012 and 2015—allow a rich understanding of the issues. Just as the progress of coeducation was “non-linear” (56) for the institutions Malkiel focuses on in her study, the mixing of men and women in the workplace was, and still is, uneven and unequal in countless ways.

At times, Malkiel becomes so engulfed by her massive amounts of primary source material that she forgets to interject what other historians have written about these same debates. In Chapter 18, for instance, on Wellesley’s decision to remain a women’s only college, she cites correspondence, internal memorabilia, interviews, newspaper accounts, telegrams, trustee minutes, notes, and reports—but not a single other historian to counterbalance her own reading and interpretation of the sources. The result is a book that is part history, “part memoir” (xxii), as Malkiel acknowledges herself in the preface. Despite this tendency, or perhaps because of it, *Keep the Damned Women Out* is a passionate investigation of the process of integrating women into Ivy League education. Along with being of interest to those who, like Malkiel, were a part of these events, the book will be indispensable to those who in the future pursue research on higher education or on these specific institutions. It is an epic book on an epic topic that is well worth studying.

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